

Social Responsibility and Trust in Online Gambling: **Six Steps to Success**

By **Dr Mark Griffiths**, Professor of Gambling Studies at Nottingham Trent University.

In the 23 years that I have been carrying out research into the psychology of gambling, social responsibility has never been higher on the gaming industry's agenda than it is now. In this short article I will briefly outline six important factors that I believe are critical to online player acquisition and retention. These are (i) branding, (ii) trust, (iii) reputation management and enhancement, (iv) website design, (v) company identification with the player, and (vi) social responsibility.

(1) Branding

Every great brand has an outstanding feature at its heart. A product also needs time and to be promoted and communicated consistently to become a brand. Repetition appears to be one of the

will be more likely to gamble online with those companies that are well established than a little known company operating out of the Caribbean. It has been claimed that successful brands have a 'trustmark' rather than a trademark. With the embedding of regulatory and problem gambling regimes, a 'trustmark' is an apt gauge for social acceptability and social responsibility. However, getting transferability and connections across brands in the 'mainstream' is probably the key issue. For many Internet gambling operators and other online commercial organisations, the mechanism to establish trust has been to pursue a 'clicks and mortar' approach of combining an offline presence (and brand recognition) with online presence. 'Trustmarks' are thought to be

(3) Reputation management and enhancement

It was once argued that the Internet would provide a level playing field for small and large retailer alike. However, given the need to establish trust, it would seem that organisations with a good existing offline reputation are at an advantage. Research into online purchasing of books and flight bookings show that the perceived size and reputation of the company determines consumers' likelihood of purchasing from it. The reason for this is that increased size and reputation led to higher trust, which in turn, influences the perception of risk and the willingness to buy. Recent psychological thinking proposes a three stage model for understanding how people assess the trustworthiness of a website. The first stage assumes that people are faced with a large number of potential websites and thus engage in rapid, heuristic-based analysis based on the design of the site, rather than the content. During the second stage, people engage in a more systematic analysis of the content of the site, and it is during this stage that people are influenced by apparent integrity, benevolence and expertise. The third stage is a relationship development and integration stage, that is, people's continued use of a site, personalization and the integration of experience.

Trust is an historical concept because customers need repeated interactions coupled with good feelings to build it. Branding experts claim it takes at least three years to establish the feeling of goodwill among consumers. The good news for companies – including the gaming industry – is that customers do not have to have experienced the product. Customers might engage in things because others have used or engaged in the product for years. Although little studied in empirical gambling investigations, trust is thought to be an important variable in both the initial decision to gamble and the maintenance of the behaviour. In a study of nearly 11,000 people carried out by our gaming research unit, four-fifths of Internet gamblers (79%) considered the Internet

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keys to establishing brand success. Online gaming sites often get bad press and are often viewed as unsafe and risky places. Negative press and enough negative feedback from customers can bring the brand into disrepute (for instance, just look at Toyota recently).

(2) Trust

What really determines a brand – and this is especially important in the online gambling arena – is trust. Trust is of paramount importance in e-commerce generally, and in getting people to gamble online more specifically. Without trust, the spending of money online is unlikely. Players

one of the major reasons why consumers prefer one particular product to other non-familiar ones. They communicate that customers have not been let down by the product and they can reduce anxiety by using it. At the heart of gambling there will always be the underlying fact that in the long run, most players lose. Whichever way the gaming industry plays out this truism, the general situation of players mostly losing represents an underlying negativity that competes with the wit and innovation of demonstrating that the minority of real long-term winners are the central focus and purpose of participating. This is one of the main reasons why trust becomes so important.



Table 1: Elements used for trust evaluation on Internet websites

| | CREATES TRUST | CREATES MISTRUST |
|--------------------------------|--|--|
| DESIGN | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not mix content and advertising • Contact information, 'real world' feel (e.g. photographs) • Seals of approval (e.g. TRUSTe) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertises • Small text • Poor layout and design (too complex or amateur) • Spelling mistakes • Broken links • Slow to load |
| CONTENT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Others' viewpoints (reviews, independent assessments) • Simple language • Privacy, security policies, customer relations information | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too much jargon, confusing terminology • Sales pitch • Mixes advertising with content |
| RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Privacy, security policies, customer relations information • Personalized services, tailored design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No information on returns policy • No attempt to personalize users' experience |

a trustworthy medium of gambling. However, most Internet gamblers (90%) preferred to gamble on websites of well-known and trusted 'high street' bookmakers.

(4) Website design

A critical part of the first stage of assessing trustworthiness of an online company relies on the design of the website. Studies have found that people can judge the visual attractiveness of a website within 50 milliseconds. Furthermore, there have been a number of studies that have identified the critical design elements during this early stage. The findings of the elements found in trustworthy and untrustworthy sites are summarised in Table 1.

(5) Company identification with the player

One of the most important things about brands for the gaming industry is that they help consumers define their self-image and who they are – at least on some psychological level. For some people, this 'personal branding' may be more important than their social identities within a community. For

example, the car they drive or the newspaper they read, are particularly strong cultural indicators of what sort of person they are. Where they gamble and on what games can be an extension of this. However, total trust acceptance may also lead to an uncritical assessment of acceptability by the punter. For instance, some trusted non-gambling websites now provide links and endorsements to either their own gambling sites, or those of affiliates. Our gaming research unit recently highlighted a case of an online problem gambler who had been led to an online gambling site by watching a popular (and trusted) daytime television programme that promoted its own online gaming site.

(6) Social responsibility

As mentioned above, 'trustmarks' are likely to be important in relation to social responsibility and the perception of it by players. In recent studies conducted by our gaming research unit with online gamblers around the world, we found that many of them felt that responsible gaming practises demonstrate that a gaming operator has integrity, and that they care about their players' wellbeing. For

instance, many online poker players did not want their winnings to come from players who could not afford to lose it. They reported that responsible gaming practises allowed them to feel comfortable that their winnings had not come from people with gambling problems. Given that one of the biggest obstacles that prevent people playing online is a lack of trust of operators, this is a significant and important finding that gaming operators should take note of.

For me, all of these factors are highly inter-linked. However, I believe that those who end up being the most successful online gaming companies will be the ones with the best social responsibility protocols and infrastructure, and that this will engender trust among its clientele. ■

Dr Mark Griffiths

Dr Mark Griffiths is Professor of Gambling Studies and Director of the International Gaming Research Unit at Nottingham Trent University.